



# Electoral Politics in the East Malaysian State of Sabah and the Future of “Sabah for Sabahans”

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### SYNOPSIS

*The 17th Sabah State Election, due in the next six months, represents a critical juncture for Sabah's political trajectory, particularly for the “[Sabah for Sabahans](#)” ideology, which champions local autonomy and identity within Malaysia's federal framework. This election will determine whether Sabah can consolidate its push for greater self-governance, as promised under the Malaysia Agreement 1963, amidst a fragmented political landscape, shifting coalitions, and the fallout from a recent corruption scandal. The election is pivotal for advancing the “Sabah for Sabahans” movement, offering Sabahans a chance to strengthen political control and redefine federal-state relations. The outcome, however, hinges on coalition dynamics, the scandal's impact, and the ability of state-based parties to harness voters' sentiments beyond the localised context.*

### COMMENTARY

#### Coalition Dynamics: Contested Political Arena

Sabah's political scene is notoriously fluid, marked by frequent defections and coalition realignments, often likened to “frogs” hopping between parties. The incumbent Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS), led by Chief Minister Hajiji Noor, comprises local parties including Parti Gagasan Rakyat Sabah (Gagasan), Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP), Parti Solidariti Tanahairku (STAR), and United Sabah National Organisation (USNO).

GRS governs Sabah in alliance with Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's unity government at the federal level, formed by Pakatan Harapan (PH) and Barisan Nasional (BN). However, tensions and rifts erupt from time to time as the respective coalition parties jostle for political advantage and survival.

The opposition adds further complexity. Parti Warisan Sabah (Warisan), led by Shafie Apdal, plans to contest independently, criticising coalition politics as breeding “political blackmail”. Warisan’s strong 2020 performance, securing 23 state seats, underscores its appeal.

Perikatan Nasional (PN), comprising the Peninsular-based Bersatu and PAS, intends to contest at least half of the 73 seats; however, Sabah voters have consistently rejected the political Islam agenda of PAS. There is half a dozen other “mosquito parties” around individual personalities, and independents risking fragmenting votes, increasing the likelihood of a hung assembly.

Possible coalition outcomes are varied. GRS may maintain its PH-BN alliance, leveraging federal support, but overlapping seat claims could lead to multi-cornered contests. A GRS-Warisan “Sabah bloc” could amplify local-first sentiment, though historical rivalries and Warisan’s rejection of GRS overtures make this a last-minute deal, if any. A BN-UMNO-Warisan alliance, targeting Muslim constituencies and challenging GRS, is another possibility.

A speculated PN solo run risks splitting Malay-Muslim votes, potentially benefiting GRS or Warisan. Given Sabah’s history of post-election realignments, the final government may depend on post-poll negotiations, with the incumbency of GRS and faithful adherence to the 1963 Malaysia Agreement giving it an edge, though not a guarantee. The most likely outcome is an agreement on some seats, with the rest being decided by a free-for-all, allowing multiple electoral coalitions to form.

### **The Corruption Scandal: Undermining Trust**

The November 2024 [corruption scandal](#), involving leaked videos that allegedly show bribes for a mining project, poses a significant challenge to the credibility of GRS. The leaks implicated ten lawmakers, all from GRS, including Sabah Finance Minister Masidi Manjun, and two Sabah deputy chief ministers, Jeffrey Kitingan and Joachim Gunsalam, and former Sabah Mineral Management chief Jontih Enggihon, who accused Hajiji of power abuse.

The Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) has charged the whistle-blower and two assemblymen, with implicated figures cooperating, but the scandal threatens GRS’ reformist image. Hajiji has dismissed the videos as a politically motivated attempt to destabilise his government, suggesting that they were professionally orchestrated by his rivals.

The scandal’s electoral impact could be substantial. Anwar’s anti-corruption stance pressures him to distance himself from implicated GRS leaders to maintain federal credibility. Yet, alienating GRS risks destabilising his coalition, which relies on Sabah’s 25 parliamentary seats at the federal level. Thus far, Anwar has taken a [neutral position](#).

For GRS, the scandal may erode trust among urban and younger voters wary of “money politics.” Warisan and UMNO are poised to exploit the issue, framing it as evidence of GRS’s governance failures. However, UMNO’s own corruption baggage

may weaken its moral authority. GRS could face significant voter backlash, potentially tipping the balance toward Warisan or a BN-led coalition.

### **The “Sabah for Sabahans” Ideology: A Defining Moment**

The “Sabah for Sabahans” ideology, rooted in the 1963 Malaysia Agreement, is central to the significance of the forthcoming election. [Sabah’s grievances](#) – resource exploitation, federal interference, and cultural marginalisation – fuel demands for greater control over oil and gas, education, health, and revenue sharing (40 per cent as per Article 112D).

The 2022 constitutional amendment, which recognised the Malaysia Agreement 1963 and designated Sabah as a “Borneo State”, marked progress, but left unfulfilled promises, such as the 5 per cent oil royalty despite Sabah’s 42 per cent contribution to Malaysia’s crude oil production. GRS, under leaders like Jeffrey Kitingan, has championed this ideology, advocating for [one-third parliamentary representation](#) and sectoral autonomy, and positioning the forthcoming election as a referendum on Sabah’s place in the Malaysian federation.

The election’s outcome will shape whether Sabah can emulate Sarawak’s success under Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS), which secured significant autonomy, including control over gas distribution via Petros in 2025. A GRS victory, particularly if it wins outright, could strengthen a “Borneo Bloc” with GPS, amplifying Sabah’s leverage over the federal authority and advancing implementation of the 1963 Malaysia Agreement.

Conversely, a Warisan-led government will prioritise local interests. A BN or PN win, tied to Malay-centric agendas, could undermine “Sabah for Sabahans” by reinforcing federal dominance, especially if Islamic policies alienate non-Muslim Kadazandusun-Murut (KDM) communities, who view state nationalism as a shield against cultural assimilation.

The corruption scandal threatens this vision by undermining trust in local leadership, potentially weakening the narrative of Sabahans governing themselves. At the same time, it also galvanises the ideology by highlighting the need for transparent, Sabah-centric governance. Voters may rally behind parties promising accountability and autonomy, making the election a crucible for defining Sabah’s identity as a multicultural, autonomous region within Malaysia.

### **Likely Outcome and Implications**

Predicting the election outcome is challenging given Sabah’s volatility, but GRS holds a slight advantage due to incumbency, ‘Sabah for Sabahans’ ideology, and the momentum on longstanding issues under the Malaysia Agreement 1963. A hung assembly is likely, with GRS potentially securing the largest bloc, followed by PH-Sabah. Post-election negotiations will be decisive. If nobody holds a majority, Musa Aman, the former Chief Minister who is now the state Governor, will play a pivotal role in selecting who will have the chance to form a state government.

The election’s stakes for “Sabah for Sabahans” are immense. A strong GRS performance could solidify Sabah’s role as a counterweight to Peninsular Malaysia’s

Malay-Islamic framework, fostering a more pluralistic Malaysia, and strengthen the “Borneo Bloc” with Sarawak’s GPS. Failure to capitalise on this moment risks perpetuating federal marginalisation, stalling progress on realising the envisioned goals of the Malaysia Agreement 1963, and eroding Sabah’s multicultural ethos. By voting for local-first parties, Sabahans can assert their right to self-determination, making the 2025 state election a defining chapter in their quest for autonomy, fairness, and identity.

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